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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the translation process focuses on inferencing strategy, using attributes and contexts that are familiar in recognizing or making sense of what is unfamiliar in a text. Examples drawn from Belgian translation student work are used to illustrate this principle in operation, at several levels of difficulty. The examples come from texts translated from English into French and accompanied by student commentaries on problems encountered during translation. Errors from language interference are distinguished from true translation problems whose solution requires reflection and possibly further research, using a dictionary or other tool. Inferencing with immediately available cues and inferencing involving more complicated intellectual processes are examined. It is concluded that there is a compelling argument for further study of grammatical and stylistic detail so both this information and greater awareness of its practical use can be communicated to students of translation. Contains 16 references. (MSE)

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ED 414 749

Inferencing and the Student of Translation.

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Introductory remarks

While it seems that a true interest in the pedagogy of translation is at last beginning to emerge, little attempt has been made to date to study overall student performance and in particular to study how students acquire translation skills in real situations. Although it is true that a very considerable literature exists on the theoretical aspects of the subject and manuals and coursebooks abound, little research has been conducted with the aim of uncovering the strategies employed by fledgling translators in resolving interlingual difficulties. More often than not the emphasis is on the product rather than on the process; on the finished works rather than on the way in which they have been achieved. The theoretical frameworks provided have been usually fairly hard-nosed affairs drawing on existing translations rather than on hypothetical work. There is nothing inherently invalid about such approaches. They are, arguably, what the consumer of the finished article as well as the theoretical linguist can best use. Our criticism is that they supply us with very little real information about what is going on in the mind of the practising translation student. It is significant that in his 1991 book, Newmark noted that scarcely anything had been written on the topic of how the teacher might best intervene to assist the learner. Another commentator described the situation in the following words: "...teachers still tend to rely on intuition and practice as the only way to train translators" (Baker, 1990:167).

Yet, researchers have begun to modify their stances in recent years. Rigid descriptive scientific approaches are giving way to more communicatively orientated views stressing function. The translation process is being seen increasingly in terms of what it is intended to achieve in terms of the target culture. Nord's plea for better translation models with didactic relevance are evidence of this trend. It is significant that a writer of Delisle's stature should write that "traduire consiste à réexprimer non les signes, mais des concepts, des idées" (Deslisle 1980: 72). The same author, in his 1994 manual goes on to tackle the very real problem of polysemy, deploring those translators who always translate the English word problem by probléme when in fact, depending on the case, the word

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can be translated in some 94 different ways. In descriptive terms, the focus is moving away from the discreet units to encompass considerations of context and also to some extent from form to meaning.

This change of direction which we identified is becoming increasingly visible in the field of psycholinguistics. It is significant that such a highly regarded researcher as Ellis, while drawing upon an impressive body of research, stresses that one of the reasons why the "metacognitively sophisticated learner" is successful is that he has developed "strategies for explicitly mapping the meanings of words, for enmeshing them into the meaning networks of other words and concepts and imagery representations" (Ellis, 1994:52). We would argue that this is of particular importance in the case of translation students, since they are engaged precisely in building up extensive networks of meaning, which they will need to access at various times in solving translation problems.

To our view, it is also important that in the above-quoted text, Ellis frequently refers to the concept known as inferencing. Basically, when we infer we utilize attributes and contexts that are familiar in recognizing or making sense of what is unfamiliar. The process may be held to suggest, though it need not necessarily denote formal logical inference as used in the sciences or more especially in law, which is the method of drawing permissible conclusions from available data. As a psychological approach we might describe it as the attentive reading of convergent cues. In fact, though perhaps underexploited by theorists, the concept has a respectable history in applied linguistics. In a highly regarded though subsequently neglected paper, Carton claimed a major role for this process which "undoubtedly comprises part of the strategies for learning and using language" (1971:56).

Of course, it might be added that from the linguist's point of view, the distinct unit such as the morpheme, word or sentence lend themselves to ready analysis. One of the arguments we wish to make is that in the field of Translation Studies, this approach is scarcely ever adequate. As Steiner very eloquently put it: "Language is fluid" in its operations: "a coherence, if such a description is allowed, in constant motion" (1985:203). The root problem, as one commentator astutely pointed out, is that, unlike an individual word or morpheme, "a sentence rarely expresses a complete thought" (Kaplan, 1972: 26). To discover the overall meaning of an utterance we need to go beyond the cosy individual units and become aware of the wider system of cross references which may be operating. Highly influential writers such as Vinay and Darbelnet viewed the translation process as primarily a science. A hefty proportion of their

famous *Stylistique Comparée* is devoted to describing a system for converting stretches of language A into language B. The well-known *procédés* of the authors do not so much solve problems for students as describe relationships obtaining between groups of words and identify possibilities for rearrangement on the basis of category. It will be instructive to examine just one of their best known examples, namely, that of transposition as in the following sentence:

Il traversa la rivière à la nage = he swam across the river

The descriptive action verb "swam" is rendered by the more neutral verb "traversa" (to cross) requiring an adverbial adjunct "à la nage" to clarify the nature of the activity. The operation is said to involve a change at the level of grammatical category. However, if we move on to examine another example we see that this type of comparison is of limited use. We can easily envisage cases where "traversa" need not be qualified at all but would still be translated as "swim". In the sentence:

Etant tombé dans la rivière, il la traversa.

We identify "traversa" as meaning "swam", not through any analysis of the word itself, but because of the proceeding clause and the visual image conveyed by "rivière". We are not informed how the crossing took place, we simply scan the relevant stretch of text, read the available cues and draw the obvious conclusions. We would claim that the primary strategy involved here is that of *inferencing*.

Selecting the appropriate translation for the French word directeur will provide a different kind of example. Students are invariably informed that the correct translation for this word in a commercial setting is the English term "manager". In a typical example, this principle works well enough:

Le *directeur* affirma que la société avait fait des bénéfices.

(lit: The manager stated that the company had made profits).

Yet if we consider the following pair of sentences occurring in succession it will be seen that that when making an assessment, considerable care is needed:

1) La fréquentation du théâtre était en baisse depuis le début de la saison précédente.

2) En cons,quence, lors de réunion annuelle, le directeur a dû présenter un déficit budgétaire important.

The student who blindly translates sentence 2 without referring back to the overall context provided by sentence I will produce a serious, if understandable error. Terms like "budgétaire" and "déficit" both suggest a commercial context and may tend to trigger the English word "manager". In fact, if the student remains mindful of the information contained in the preceeding sentence, he will grasp that the correct rendering is certainly *theatrical* or *stage director*. Of course, the basic inferencing strategy will need to be backed up by efficient dictionary usage. The mistake which we have described would not necessarily be the outcome of misuse of the dictionary. Rather, it is the kind of overall strategy followed which is important. Central to this process is the attentive reading of the cues and clues provided by the textual context and drawing the right conclusions as to meaning.

Focus on practice: some elementary cases.

In what follows we will provide a number of examples drawn from student work where we believe this principle is seen to be clearly at work. These are drawn largely from the final year theses at the Ecole d'Interprètes Internationaux at Mons University in Belgium. Students taking English usually choose to translate a book from English to French, which might be either fiction or non-fiction. They occasionally work the other way round i.e. into English, but since they are franco-phones for the most part this is quite rare. They are required to write a fairly elaborate commentary where difficulties encountered in the course of doing the assignment are logged, analysed and described. It is an ideal source of raw material for the kind of research we are doing, since being open-ended and not elicited it does focus on real as distinct from theoretical or potential translation problems. In addition, the students are at a very advanced level in English which means that they can usually see the difference between a "goof" caused by blind language *interference* and the true translation problem whose solution requires reflection and possibly further research. Also, included are some examples taken from in-class exercises with third-year groups.

The first example to be presented is taken from a translation of a social history entitled Scottish Voices.

1) "At the word 'dungarees' the women would groan in sympathy. Washing dungarees was a job they all hated and ours was a railway district...".

The dictionary defines this item as coarse Indian calico, overalls etc., jeans. The Harrap's gives combinaison, bleus (de m,canicien). The student is faced with choosing not just which word is most accurate but which word can be expected to have a comparable effect on the francophone reader. The two words which help us to arrive at the right decision are "groan" and "Railway". We understand that the garments in question were the cause of much unpleasantness and we can imagine through contextualization, the kind of greasy condition in which the womenfolk received them. "Bleus" seemed most suitable and most calculated to produce a similar reaction.

> "Au mot 'bleus', les femmes grognaient en signe de compassion. Toutes sans exception détestaient de laver les bleus de travail, mais comme notre quartier, tait un quartier des cheminots...".

The next example is taken from Seán Ó Faoláin's famous book *The Irish.* "...everywhere dark and well-nigh impassable woods - battles in 'passes' generally meant passes through forests..." (p.39). The difficulty here concerns the precise meaning of the word 'passes'. A careful reading here will reveal that the word is not being used in the modern sense of a *narrow passage through mountains* (Concise Oxford Dictionary). The nearest equivalent word in French 'passage' cannot be used so the student opts for "...dans les allées des forêts...". This might be considered a particularly easy case since the author of the source text had identified the problem in advance. Nonetheless, some visualization of the geographical context was needed in order for the student not to be misled.

The next example involves a rather deplorable error caused by a failure on the student's part to look beyond the individual sentence at the wider context. The excerpt is taken from *We Europeans* Richard Hill's best-selling book on the peoples of Europe. "...One wonders whether this is the effect the 'clubbishness' of the English establishment or a reflection of what is basically a two-party system..." (p.52). The main problem is posed by the word 'clubbishness' a relatively rare word. Apparantly, misled by ready images of robust truncheon-wielding British bobbies, the student produced the following statement first time round:

> "...one peut se demander si ceci provient du penchant des Anglais pour leur matraques ou bien..." (lit.: one wonders whether this is because of the British liking for their truncheons...).

While we might be first tempted to dismiss this error as mis-use or even non-use of the dictionary, I would tend to argue that the core of the problem is that the student has failed to read the sentence where 'clubbishness' occurs in its wider context. In fact, there had been enough information about clubs and English social life in the preceeding section to guide the student in the right direction. The same paragraph contained the key-word 'establishment' which should have provided a clue as to the sense in which 'club' was to be understood.

Inferencing: more complicated cases.

The three cases discussed above involved inferencing at the level of immediately available cues. The student needed to scan, study and reflect in order to come up with the right solution. The following examples involve more complicated intellectual processes.

The first example comes from a book of Irish folk tales. When working into French, a particular problem is raised by repetition. English tolerates rather well the re-use of the English word say in its different morphological variants. Acceptable written French shuns jarring repetition of this sort. Consequently, in the following extract, the student was forced to study the story in some detail so as to extrapolate the exact psychological frame of mind of the characters in the story at the time when the utterance was made. I reproduce the English text followed sentence by sentence by the appropriate translation into French in Italics, the problematical word being underlined in each case.

> "Who will dig the grave?" says the first man.
> *"Qui va creuser la tombe?" demanda l'un des trois hommes.*

Here we infer that say is used in the sense of "ask" requiring *demander* in French.

> "Who will dig it then but Paddy Ahern" says they.
> *"Mais Paddy Ahern bien sûr!" s'exclamèrent les deux autres.*

Here the circumstances are analyed to infer that "say" is used to express an exclamation. The third time the men speak it is understood that they are sniggering (ricaner = snigger).

> "...who will open it but Paddy Ahern!" says they.
> *"..mais Paddy Ahern bien sûr!" ricanèrent les deux autres.*

The type of operation we have been describing is a difficult though necessary exercise requiring several reflective readings of the original. Sensitivity to context and authorial intention as seen to be of paramount importance. The tendency to translate words fairly blindly and mechanically is undoubtedly responsible for the flatness which Delisle, amongst others, has singled out as one of the hallmarks of bad translation work.

The next example is taken from a short story in French in the style of La Fontaine. The problem encountered in rendering it in English derives from the fact that the French word for *crow*, *corneille* is feminine. Nonetheless, when the name of the bird in the story occurs as an antecedent, normal usage requires the use of the masculine pronoun. This raises an unusual difficulty for an anglophone working in English since he will need to *neutralize* the gender difference, translating both *elle* and *il* and their variants by *he* and its variants in all cases.

> *Il était une fois une corneille qui habitait dans une forêt grande et dense. Elle s'appelait Pierre...*
> *Il n'y a q"une seule chose qui le tracassait: la qualité de sa voix.*
> (once upon a time there was a crow who lived in large dense forrest. He was called Peter. ...There was only one thing which annoyed him: the quality of his voice).

The next example is taken from an article in a special feature supplement on Italian styles of management which appeared in the Belgian daily 'Le Soir' some years ago. The difficulty consists in identifying the title: "L'heure des artistes a sonné". Is it to be interpreted in a positive or a negative light? Interestingly, the group to which this article was presented as an in-class exercise split down the middle. Those who reacted instinctively opted for a negative reading, possibly making a cross-association with the expression "sonner le glas" (lit. sound death-knell of some one). This negative reading seems to receive some support from the opening lines of the article. We are informed that:

> *"Frappés de plein fouet par la crise de ces dernières années, les peintres se trouvent actuellement dans une situation de plus en plus précaire ..."*
> ("Severely hit by the recession over the past few years, artists are currently finding themselves in an increasingly precarious position ...".)

We are then informed that interest in art seems to be on the decline and that art-works are fetching lower prices than before. All this might confirm our initial impression. However, as we read carefully on to the end of the text we begin to realize that the point being made by the writer is that in spite of the difficulties currently faced by artists, better things are in store for them. The article comes to an end by stating:

> *"Ce nouveau festival qui démarrera fin août permettra au grand public de mieux connaître le rôle-clé qu'ont joué les artistes à Venise depuis la renaissance."*
> (This new festival which gets off to a start at the end of August will enable the public to learn more about the crucial role which artists have played in Venice since the Renaissance.)

In point of fact, the writer was attempting to show that artists would once again have an important role to play in the city of Venice. The title might best be translated by an optimistic sounding phrase along the lines "New horizons open up for artists". Those students who read through to the end and executed the translation in the spirit of the text as a whole were in a better position to make the right judgements. Clearly, this example teaches us a lot about the pitfalls of doing translation. An understanding of the original document *as a whole* is absolutely indispensible to the production of acceptable work. It is not enough to perform operations on parts of the source text in isolation from each other as at least some traditional theorists seemed to believe. A keen awareness of what is being communicated in other parts of the text will enable us to make the right *inferences* about how we should translate.

Concluding remarks.

There is little doubt in my mind that the procedure which I have termed *inferencing* has long been part of the standard panoply of strategic approaches used by translators. Nonetheless, professionals have always been fairly sceptical of theory and something of a gulf has existed between them and the class-room teacher. Those of us involved in teaching the subject have often laid too much stress on grammatical and stylistic details. Though this type of approach may have its place, there is a compelling argument in favour of studying these skills, such as inferencing, so that we can learn more about what is going on. In turn this information can be communicated to the student of translation. Consciousness-raising, represented in the present context by guided inferencing can play an important role in all this. The proposal to place greater emphasis on this process and encourage greater awareness of its

practical use represent a sharp departure from those views of translation pedagogy which all too often reduced translation exercises to fluent item replacement or even worse to morpho-syntactical shadow-boxing.

It is the view of the present writer that when students are encouraged to read attentively, reflect, imagine, compare, make global or local assessments beyond the immediate unit, seek out clues in an overall attempt to get the feel of the source text, they are better prepared to carry out assignments. Obviously, efficient accessing of glosseries, as well as the mental lexicon and dictionaries has a crucial role to play. Yet it does not address a very basic question which is how this information should be used. As more than one specialist in terminology has readily admitted, too much emphasis on this particular field can actually undermine translator training, tempting students to look only for "terminological equivalents and translate without due regard for larger units of meaning" (Sager, 1991:109).

Indeed, I would not question the view that practice is essential in developing and refining translation skills. I would add, however, that a heightened sensitivity to the kinds of problems we have been discussing could do much to speed up this learning process, bringing nearer the day when the translator will be able to work on his own.

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